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## Why Everyone Deserves a Holiday from the Euro Crisis

Eurocrisis in the Press

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The politics of public discourse in Europe

By *Henry Radice*

In Britain, it is called the silly season. As July languorously turns to August, even the broadsheets fill their pages with human interest stories and discussions of political leaders' holiday destinations. In reality, the latter category of 'news' represents not so much a vacation from politics, but politics at its most powerfully symbolic. Furthermore, at a time of year when much of Northern Europe heads South, the international politics of elite holidaymaking are particularly relevant to the broader framings of European political discourse.



Beyond the obvious pitfalls of crudely representing North-South power dynamics, politicians across Europe are faced with a variation of the same dilemma, should they wish to avoid being portrayed as workaholic automatons: at a time of intense anxiety about unemployment, especially youth unemployment, how to engage in a cultural practice redolent of an idealised, carefree youth, and defined specifically by the fact of not working? How leaders situate themselves in relation to practices of work and leisure, and experiences of worklessness and poverty-driven exclusion from leisure, is of consequence for their public perception, potentially revealing of their sense of what is 'normal', and indicative of their relationship between the personal and the political.

More broadly, though, politicians' holidays need to be read from the perspective of the political visions of humanity and of the good life that they represent. Central to these understandings are conceptions of work/life balance.

*The Economist's* 'Charlemagne' column recently [stated](#) that 'nobody argues that the answer to the crisis is to take even more holidays'. This is perhaps too simplistic. For instance, it may matter who is taking what kind of holiday where. If it is the case that one of the more genuine comparative advantages of much of Southern Europe is tourism, then North-South intra-European holidaymaking may represent a valuable fiscal transfer to sustainable industries (and perhaps reduce some negative externalities, e.g. the pollution of long-haul leisure-related flights to alternative destinations). It may also be useful to think about four-day weeks, job-sharing or other practices that spread work around in different ways and potentially improve work/life balances.

It is worth noting that most of those who engage in public discourse about the politics of leisure have, in relative terms, an extraordinary, historically-unprecedented degree of autonomy over their own leisure. They tend to have little personal experience of sustained periods of repetitive, mundane work in the kinds of organisations in which a legal entitlement is the only guarantee of having any leisure time at all. Witness the recurring scandals about factory conditions in 'competitor' states such as China, the very states often cited as justification for policies alleged to preserve the economic 'health' of Europe.

There have, of course, been important attempts in recent years to shift the debate on economic performance away from an over-reliance on headline indicators such as GDP growth, and towards more obviously socially embedded notions such as happiness or sustainability. The crisis seems, however, to have reinforced the importance of those totemic economic virility symbols. This is not to belittle their importance, for lost output does indeed mean lost jobs and reduced life chances, but rather to bemoan their insufficiency.

One of the common features of crises is that they tend to lead us to invoke language and measures of emergency. Domestic analogies of belt-tightening are often employed to justify the retrenchment of hard-won social gains, with the implicit promise that better times might lead to their reinstatement. Yet we know that this rarely happens, as the rhetorical, economic and social start-up costs of reconstruction tend to appear dauntingly high, and there are always other crises on the horizon. So the nature of the chosen pathway to recovery matters as much as the fact of eventual recovery itself.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, in a period of genuinely crippling austerity, British Labour politicians responded with a vision of the good life, and attempted to build institutions to deliver that vision, such as the NHS. Many suggestions have of course been put forward, including on this [blog](#), along those lines. But the important, broader debate, about why we should use the crisis to identify and enhance those things we think genuinely valuable about our polities, still seems impoverished, or absent. The forging of a leisure ethic, alongside the work ethic we all pay endless lip service to, is a serious and valuable business, and one that we abandon at our peril.

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